

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Communicable Disease Control

Diphtheria

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a disease, caused by a bacteria. It has a sudden onset and attacks the tonsils, throat or nasal passage and interferes with breathing. The bacteria produces a poison which can damage the heart, kidney, and nerves. Occasionally, the bacteria infects and inflames the skin.

Who gets diphtheria?

Unimmunized children under 15 years of age are most likely to contract diphtheria. The disease is also found among adults whose immunization was neglected and is most severe in unimmunized or inadequately immunized individuals.

How is diphtheria spread?

Diphtheria is transmitted to others through close contact with discharge from an infected person's nose, throat, skin, eyes, and sores. Raw milk has occasionally been found to carry the diphtheria bacteria.

What are the symptoms of diphtheria?

There are two types of diphtheria. One type involves the nose and throat, and the other involves the skin. Symptoms include sore throat, low grade fever and enlarged lymph glands located in the neck. Skin lesions may be painful, swollen and reddened.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear 2-4 days after infection with a range of 1-6 days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread diphtheria?

Untreated people who are infected with the diphtheria germ can be contagious for up to two weeks, but seldom more than four weeks. Rarely, some persons can carry and spread the disease for up to six months. If treated with appropriate antibiotics, the contagious period can be limited to less than four days.

Does past infection with diphtheria make a person immune?

Recovery from diphtheria is not always followed by lasting immunity.

Is there a vaccine for diphtheria?

Yes. It is usually combined in the diphtheria, tetanus, and acellular pertussis vaccine (DtaP). This vaccine should be routinely given to children with doses at 2, 4, 6, and 15 months of age, and a dose given between four and six years of age (pre-school booster). A combination of tetanus and diphtheria vaccine (Td) should be given to everyone, including adults, every ten years to maintain immunity.

What is the treatment for diphtheria?

Certain antibiotics, such as Penicillin and Erythromycin may be effective to treat cases of diphtheria. If diphtheria disease is strongly suspected to be present, there is an anti-toxin which should be given immediately.

What can be the effect for persons that acquire diphtheria?

Diphtheria can cause serious complications such as paralysis, heart failure, and blood disorders. One out of 10 cases of diphtheria is fatal.

How can diphtheria be prevented?

The single most effective control measure is being immunized properly against diphtheria and maintaining the highest possible immunization levels in the community. Other methods of control include prompt treatment of cases and a community surveillance program to identify the occurrence of the disease.

How can I be certain that I am protected against diphtheria?

Persons unsure of their immune status should consult their health care provider to determine necessary diphtheria immunizations. All persons should have an Immunization Record Card that documents when they received vaccination against diphtheria. To receive an immunization card, contact your health care provider.